



Changing the old way of Thinking : Geling Yan's *The Thirteen*

***Flowers of Nianjing* in a Postcolonial Frame**

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Abstract in English

Although formally considered as a novella, *The Thirteen Flowers of Nanjing* attains a scope and depth comparable to that of a novel through its concentrated engagement with essential events during the Japanese invasion. This study moves beyond the dominant historical readings of the text to foreground its potent, yet critically overlooked, postcolonial dimension—a dimension carefully rooted by the author from the opening pages. Through a postcolonial analysis, this research examines key narrative episodes to demonstrate how the novella articulates a resistance narrative not through conventional opposition, but through sacrifice and resurrection. Specifically, it argues that the subaltern—particularly women—becomes the vehicle through which the colonized Chinese nation “writes back,” asserting agency and cultural resilience. Ultimately, this research repositions the work as a significant postcolonial text, revealing its layered critique of power, memory, and identity.

Paper Info

Keywords

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1. Introduction:

“Unless the Japanese are insane, I don’t think they will kill us. They just want pleasure. That’s what we do. We have experienced all kinds of men. As long as we can get out alive, we will find a way to survive...I think, we should do something heroic, and change the old way of thinking” (p.223).

Her speech, which is depicted above, is more than just a series of words spoken by a heartless prostitute when she and other women sold their bodies to "all kinds of men" for pleasure. It is a revolutionary idea that challenges long-held beliefs about prostitutes and, consequently, the traditions of the writing profession. It asserts that vicious people should be condemned, that whores and pimps are the true wretches of the earth who don't deserve respect, and that their existence is meaningless.

However, the story implies that these women, whose sole purpose was to amuse and delight men, are actually the true subalterns whose role has abruptly shifted to become more significant than that of the Chinese soldiers and uprisings. When they realized that the schoolgirls' lives, honor, and virginity were in jeopardy when the Japanese soldiers arrived to abduct them as "comfort women", their laughing, negligence, and disregard for reality all changed.

For various reasons, most commentators overlook the novella's postcolonial aspect, which goes beyond its historical and human aspects. I suppose one of these reasons is that it is based on an actual narrative, characters, and location that occurred in China during the Japanese invasion. Thus, historical events are being transmitted in the story. However, by concentrating on specific issues that the study will highlight, the author deftly places the book on an intriguing postcolonial trajectory. The book also implies that villains can become heroes if they make the correct decisions and alter their destiny. It is a rebellion against the long-standing conventions of novel writing, which dictate that villains must be punished and disregarded.

2. Theoretical Application.

The study is based mainly on the postcolonial theory which is established to question the cultural, political, and psychological heritages of imperial power. The symbols of power in the text are dealt with according to the concepts presented by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that shows how the Western power and discourse depict the colonized as 'Other' and inferior people who need paternal care. They are regarded the illiterate group of people who simply can't rule themselves and who can't make a civilized system of laws to govern their countries. The colonizers set themselves as sent by God or having a supreme power to rule and conquer the Other's countries. In the same respect, Gayatri Spivak's influential query, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), puts deep exploration of the role of the marginalized agency, chiefly that of women. Women are shown as "doubly marginalized" because they are put between the oppression of two masculine power in their own surroundings, and the heavy effect of "colonialism, racism, and global capitalism, rendering them effectively voiceless or "doubly other"." (Mohanty, C.T. 2004, p.263). Spivak's study presents a clear insight and determines, within the text, whose sound will be heard and who will remain silent-women character in particular. Ultimately, the novella is written to be an act of resistance, a form of "writing back" to the narrative of colonial power (Ashcroft et al.,

1989,). It reveals a postcolonial struggle expressed by means of collective memory and self-sacrifice.

Nonetheless, postcolonialism draws its resources and continuity from the past of imperialism. "No literature is free floating", according to Shiva Naipaul, cited in Gilbert H. and Tompkins J. (1998. P. 4). Instead, it is founded in a particular kind of environment that gives it its energy.

This, in Young's opinion, makes postcolonialism a "continuous process" (2003, p.10) that is not age-specific. As a result, it takes inspiration from the anticolonial movements of that era to the degree that the arrangement and power structure of today are influenced by that historical period. Consequently, one of the main objectives of postcolonial research is to examine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized rather than the victorious. Additionally, postcolonialism differs from historical studies and narratives due to its unique focus on "difference", which separates it from any imperial activity or aspect of historicism.

This leads the novella to be seen as a form of struggle and of challenge to the imperial power that wants to impose its hegemony not only through land occupation, but through silencing the minds and the mouths by regarding the other's sacrifice a mere history. Geling Yan wrote the story, I believe, as a kind of triumph of the "writing back" by making the oppressed voice, especially the 13 Chinese women, heard by all the world.

3. Presentation

Postcolonialism, however, is not far away from history. They are folded together. Yet, postcolonialism becomes a means that its ends is to "repressing the past, that is to say repeating it and not surpassing it"(L. Gandhi,1998, p.7-8).

Of course, postcolonialism is strongly connected with the memories of the past that turn it to be a kind of, as some claim, "therapeutic theory" through which past actions of colonial era are revealed to uncover hidden meanings in the behavior and lives of the once colonized individuals, or as it is said that the vitality of postcolonial texts first arises from their rootedness in a particular kind of world (Goodman, L., de Gay J ,2000, p. 230). It is impossible to present a criticism for a nation's literature without making a reference to the imperial period that created the current form of that nation.

In fact, postcolonial studies and thoughts can't be limited to only on matters of colonization and conquer of land or people, but it goes further far to include all the general experiences of human individuals. To see all the sufferings, humiliation, abuses and oppression through the eyes of the marginalized. So, one of the main roles of the postcolonial literature is to give voice to the voiceless, unheard sounds of the colonized

people. Ashcroft argues that the aim is to dethrone the dominant center and transfer power to the weak and marginalized (Ashcroft, 2004, p. 176).

And this enforces more the postcolonial side of the story when it is told from below; the narrator is one of the subalterns, a victim of war, and a Chinese native girl who lost her home and her family during the Japanese conquer. Deliberately, the writer tends to make the narrator a young girl, a symbol of all the sufferings of the Chinese women. It is a story of the marginalized that forms the integrity of the indigenous literature and that allows to better understand the difference between the world of the "center" and the "peripheral". In this case, the writer's main purpose is to reveal the persecution and suppression of these people and their struggle against this persecution. However, subaltern study is in the core of postcolonial study since it is concerned with the emancipation of the marginalized indigenous people and showing to the world their sufferings and how they were exploited by the Others. Worth to mention that subaltern becomes a common attribute of subordination in the whole South Asian nations that covers all terms of gender, age, class, and caste or in any other way. It is recognized that subordination has no meaning without dominance, as the two form a fundamental power binary. Consequently, subaltern groups cannot escape the influence of ruling groups, even during acts of rebellion. The strategy was to be broadly historical, but it also needed to pay attention to the political, economic, and sociological aspects of subalternity as well as the attitudes, ideologies, and belief systems that shape that condition—in other words, the culture. “. It is this relation of power between who called themselves as the "elite" and the "subalterns" (Jasen, D. A., & Nayar, P. K 2010, p.93)

The writer of *The Flowers of War* focuses more on the conditions of Chinese women during the Japanese invasion. Women, in most of colonized nations, suffer more the pain of that awful era. In her "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*", Spivake speaks about how women become victims in colonized and postcolonised nations for being "doubly marginalized", because they are part of a postcolonial nation from one side and for being a woman. This makes women doubly oppressed by the colonizer and by the roles, traditions and the sever system of life at that time. Women, for Spivake, are in “deep dark shadows” (Spivak, 1985, p.34), since they always have the feelings of the "Other", belong to a very low state of the society. They are the real representation of the subaltern who are silenced by all means and whose lives are a continuous miserable.

It is mentioned that, “the term postcolonial is often coupled with women.” (Ashcroft,2004, p.250). Both postcolonialism and feminist writings center on themes of oppression: the former on the marginalization of subjugated peoples and classes, and the latter on the subordination of women in societies. In this sense, postcolonialism is designed mainly to target the oppression of the most exploited and most oppressed class in the colonized society. Spivak states clearly: “I think it is important to acknowledge our complicity in the muting, in order precisely to be more effective in the long run. Our work cannot succeed if we always have a scapegoat” (Spivak, ,1999, 309)

Most of Geling Yan's literary experience was highly affected by her historical background as a member of the People's Liberation Army where she joined in 1970 at the age of twelve and became part of the propaganda part troupe served in ballets and folk-dance groups and this made her visit the remote Tibetan areas and open her mind to new experiences. "*Green Blood*" 1985 and "*Whispers of a Girl Soldier*" 1987 dealt with the subject of military girls during the Sino-Vietnamese war. (Batt, H. J., 2001, 265). She studied Chinese literature and got her M.A in English fiction from USA where she lived now. She wrote many novels and short stories but were unpublished till the 1990s, like "*A girl called Xiaoyu*" published in 1993. (Hladicova, K., 2013, p.79). In her stories, females are always in a struggle to prove self-consciousness through strong impression, decisive decisions and how to deal with the circumstances. Yan tries to give a full picture about the female state during a particular historical and political condition and all other events in the story are going to be affected by the psychological and mental state of the female's mind and spirit. In "*The sent down Girl*" 1998, Yan shows the tragic story of the moral degradation of a young girl who was sent to a nomadic remote area and her tries to return home but she became a victim of exploitation and betrayal. (Hladicova, K., 2013, p.80). And in "*The Flowers of War*", Yan tells the story of a group of prostitutes who took a heroic decision to save some young, virgin Chinese girls during the Japanese invasion.

"*The Flowers of War*" or *The Thirteen Flowers of Nanjing* is Yan's master piece through which she cleverly tells the story of the Nanjing massacre during the Japanese invasion without diving deep to the historical stories of all the atrocity, brutality and destruction took place. The story was written after reading the memories of an American missionary, Ms. Minnie Vautrin, who was responsible for a college in the Chinese city. Yan's main focus is the effect of war on individuals. She stresses that "war triggers all the goodness and sometimes the darkness of human nature." (bbc 2012 interview). For her, both the Chinese people and the Japanese soldiers are victims of war since it empties man of all the human feelings and turns them to monsters whose needs should be fulfilled by any price. Father Engelmann said to Fabio:

"Are the Japanese really flouting international rules on the treatment of prisoners of war? That's an affront to all civilised, humane values. Can you believe it? Are these really the same Japanese people I know?" (p.70)

The main event of the story is the protection of a group of Chinese girls from the hands of the Japanese soldiers who wanted to take them as "comfort women". It is said that no one can determine the exact number of women raped in Nanking, but more than eighty thousand women had been raped between the years 1937 to 1938.

No woman had been excluded from children to nannies. Even the safety zone established and protected by the American and European as well was unsafe for women who left their houses and went to search for the zone. It was reported by a German

diplomat that huge number of Chinese women committed suicide in the Yangtze River which became the only way to end their miserable. (Chang, I., 2011, p.58).

Rape is one of the most important subjects in postcolonial literature since it represents a kind of overwhelming and trituration the colonized dignity and sturdiness. Metaphorically speaking, postcolonial critics always talk about the rape of nationality by the colonizer. Speaking about Yeats' poem "*Leda and the Swan*", Declan Kiperd states "the poem is simply about England's 'rape of Ireland'" (Talib, I. S., 2002, p.28)

However, the colonizer's conquer over the land is regarded incomplete mission unless they grab their fists over the women's bodies. It is the colonization of the bodies. In her *Maneuvers*, Cynthia Enloe, cited in Barberan, L. R. (2015) , declares that Rape is not motivated by financial gain or sexual desire, but rather by the assertion of power and domination over women. (Barberan, L. R. 2015, p.66). The Japanese soldiers' search for "comfort women", a term linked with the Japanese imperialistic supremacy, is a natural and a divine right since they are the soldiers of the emperor who is signed by some divine or mystic power. The same ideas of all colonizers who think of themselves as savers, literate, more educated and chosen from God to be the elite. They have a paternal role over the colonized. From the Japanese' point of view, their war was to purge all the Asian people and territory from Western ideas, to guide them to the right way because they, the Japanese, thought of themselves as a superior race and the essence of moral correctness. For Japan, it was a holy war for getting redemption. What women, especially young girls, who were simply called as "public toilet" by the Japanese, were suffering from was not only the massive rape but also from the military operations and the sever combat which they were not part of it. Testimonies from survivors describe extreme atrocities, including women being skinned alive and crucified by Japanese soldiers for sport. Other brutal acts involved the dismemberment and beheading of victims, detailing a sickening catalog of war crimes. (Barberan, L. R., 2015, p.66)

So, it is a matter of "race", as Young stated, that makes postcolonialism a continuous process not connected to a specific era or a place. Race is the essence of all the anthropological theories and according to it "binary oppositions" exist to continue dividing the world. It is an ethical relation which is based on discrimination before it has been made on domination. Through this relation, the colonizer imposes its philosophy as the universal standard of a "dominant self," forcing a psychological and cultural splitting within the colonized subject. This division is a fundamental strategy of subjugation. It is a struggle for self- certainty through which the recognition of the colonizer is established by means of totally eliminated the colonized physically and spiritually. It is a cultural crash as Said stated that draws a "paradoxical relationship which results in the validity of the division of races into advanced and backwards " (Ashcroft, 2004, p.192) Because it is fundamentally antagonistic, the colonial relationship is inherently characterized by subordination, hegemony, humiliation, and structures of power and domination. So, what the Japanese soldiers committed, and

portrayed by Yan, was a sign of power; power of race, of culture, of reason. Gate urges that race is not a superficial belief but a fundamental, socially imposed reality that shapes a person's entire existence. It strongly defines the boundaries of thought and of emotion. (Ashcroft, 2004, p. 216)

In the same mentioned interview with Giling Yan who expresses that one of the main subjects that the novella deals with is the conflict between innocence versus experience, she explains the theme of the novel:

"What I wanted to stress in this story is the young girls, the virgins are the most final conquest of the conquerors, especially for the Japanese - you cannot call it a complete conquest unless you can conquer the enemy country's women. So, the young girls coming of age are the most vulnerable and most desirable of the conquest... by protecting them I wanted to make the story more tragic and more beautiful."

The story is indeed about protection, honor, and self –sacrifice during colonization. All the bitterness, atrocities and pain are revealed through a wonderful stream of events that lead to the final result which is the protection of the little school girls; a symbol of the protection of the purity of China and its people, especially women.

The 16 school girls, who found themselves entrapped in a Catholic Church belonged to an American priest Father Engelmann who lived in China along time, couldn't reach Pokou where the safety zone was set. The girls belonged to "St. Mary Magdalene Mission School" and most of them were orphans except two of them who lost contact with their parents during the Japanese invasion of the city. The church became a shelter for other Chinese people like the church members, the arrival of three soldiers who were badly wounded and who gave a fragment about all the massacres that the Japanese soldiers committed. And finally, the presence of the unwelcomed 13 prostitutes who managed to climb the walls of the church and asked for refuge. They were taken to the cellar to hide and they were rejected by the little girls and the church staff for being whores.

Now, the concentration is over the prostitutes and how they were looked at. They were treated as "*Others*" by all people especially the little girls who looked at them with disgust and hatred. They were taken to the cellar to hide them not for the sake of protection but to separate them from the pure little girls. They were signs of corruption and bad morals. They were irresponsible, immoral, careless about all matters. It is said that most of teenagers were forced to be comfort women either by their parents or in order to pay certain debts. It was a kind of "sexual slavery". One can't imagine the pressures that those women had during that hard period of colonization. (Inuzuka, A, 2021, p.41)

The women knew that they were hated by the society and no one dared to pity them. They were prevented to enter the church first for the shortages of food, water and mainly for being prostitutes:

" The woman knelt as if she had taken root but her shoulders and back were alive with meaning: Our lives are worthless, she said. Not worth rescuing. All we are asking for is a good death. Even the lowliest of beast, pigs and dogs deserve a clean merciful death".(p.12)

From the eyes of the girls these women are "not a part of the family" (p.60). They don't deserve even food. They are simply "more rotten than a rotten melon in July. No one but the flies would want it" (p.61). They are called " Sorceress" by Fabio when one of the prostitutes "Yumo" took a bet with him about "which side you'd be on if the Chinese and foreigners had a fight "(p. 47) because he is a mixed blood.

Nevertheless, the young girls were very frightened when they heard that the Japanese soldiers would come to take them as "comfort women", and they decided to commit suicide in order not to be more than sex slaves for the Japanese soldiers and officers. They knew that their virtue as religious school girls would end to be like those hatred, lustful prostitutes who didn't care about anything but their needs. When they were summoned by the priest to sing the requiem, they were really afraid and astonished. The girls started to sing the requiem but they didn't know who it is for and then realized that it was for China "...the loss of Nanking and South China; the right to be a free people; and something else besides" (74)

Courageously and with eyes full of hope and determination, the prostitutes took an honorable and decisive decision to substitute the place of the school girls and to go with the Japanese soldiers whatever the consequences were.

"Unless the Japanese are insane, I don't think they will kill us. They just want pleasure. That's what we do. We have experienced all kinds of men. As long as we can get out alive, we will find a way to survive...I think, we should do something heroic, and change the old way of thinking" (p.223).

Led by Yumo who encouraged and convinced others to sacrifice their life to save the poor little citizens and started singing the old Chinese ancient poem to describe them, "prostitutes never care about a falling nation, they sing and dance while others are dying.". The other women were impressed by the words of the poem and of Yumo and decided to take the role. Geling Yan stated that:

"This moment is very crucial. If those prostitutes don't step forward, the Japanese will take the civilian women." The prostitutes did step forward and were taken away by the soldiers and never heard from again.... even though the prostitutes were seen as very base, not so pure... they stepped forward to protect these young women. I think it was an extraordinary

action." (b.b.c interview)

May be the women were tired from the treatment and their position in the society and they wanted to prove that they were part of this country and they did have feelings about everything not only their bright clothes and accessories. This opportunity was a prize for them: "People say "whores are heartless" so, tomorrow let's do something honorable with our hearts"

In fact, this self-sacrifice is said to be " the ultimate patriotic action" (Haselberg, C. V., & Mühlhahn, K., 2012, p.60) because it is not about the protection of the girls bodies and lives, but it is for the sake of the nation as a whole. The song they recited is taken from the nation's tradition and it is about the state of a fallen nation, so they express their sacrifice and inevitable death as a political cause. This sacrifice comes as a result of the sense that they are part of this country and it is no longer to stay silent against all the atrocities. Gayatri Spivak states that "class consciousness remains with the feeling of community that belongs to national links and political organizations, not to that other feeling of community whose structural model is the family" (Morris, R. 2010, p.31). So, it was the sense of national affairs that led the prostitutes to sacrifice themselves instead of the girls. It is impossible that these prostitutes' women are sacrificing their life for the sake of protecting the virginity of the school girls. Yan wants to equate the integrity of the female body, its virginity to be precise to the integrity of the nation. (Haselberg, C. V., & Mühlhahn, K, 2012, p.60)

There is no doubt that all facts are well known concerning the brutality and savage behavior of the Japanese soldiers and of what had happened in 1937, yet the novella is not attempting to give excuses to the invaders by ignoring more details about the barbarity of the invaders. Yan simply wants to enforce the way in which the Chinese people, as colonized people, especially women, fight back. The prostitutes' decision can be also seen as a symbolic and clear gesture that the women took the place of the Chinese soldiers who were responsible to fight the invaders. And by protecting the virgins, the prostitutes are protecting the whole nation from the corrupted hands of the invaders who tried to profane women by colonizing their bodies. It is a sign of the protection of the whole nation when the little girls will remain pure and have unstained wombs.

4.Conclusion:

In this story, fallen women and pious girls are put together in an odd gathering that represents a meeting between vice and virtue. The character of woman is taken to its limits where women's bodies, sacrifice and lives stand for a nation.

The prostitutes' characters stand for the all-marginalized women and all the subaltern figures whose lives and bodies are totally colonized and they were presented as very courageous figures who, by one way or another, managed to fight back, reject and mock the colonizer. Their patriotism is shown not on the front line like the Chinese soldiers but through their own way. The way they chose has changed all the traditions

and bad views about prostitutes. They provided paternal protection for the girls whose families had left them behind. Their patriotic sense is what makes them sacrifice their lives for the sake of protecting the new Chinese generation and future. The postcolonial dimension is shown through the apparent conflict of race, oppositions, the insistence on rape and the way the colonized have fought back. The story presents the harsh, traumatic reality of violence and loss. This clash often marks the irreversible moment where innocence is shattered by the experience of atrocity.

It can be concluded that the study interprets *The Thirteen Flowers of Nanjing* as a delicate narrative argument that elevates the voice of the voiceless subaltern and revives the fight of the colonized.

Through the protagonist's viewpoint, Geling Yan's book effectively captures the horror of war. The unimaginable atrocities that took place during those winter days were silently seen by *The thirteen flowers of Nanjing*. Every stem had the weight of memories that no history book could adequately convey, and every flower held a tale. They symbolized the beauty that endured in the face of unspeakable cruelty and the tenacity of those who survived in their fragile weakness.

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Abstract in Arabic

الخلاصة

على الرغم من تصنيفها رسميًا كرواية قصيرة، إلا أن رواية زهور نانجينغ الثلاث عشرة تكتسب نطاقًا وعمقًا يُضاهي الرواية الكاملة من خلال تركيزها الشديد على أحداث جوهرية خلال الغزو الياباني. تتجاوز هذه الدراسة القراءات التاريخية السائدة للنص لتسلط الضوء على بُعد ما بعد الاستعماري المؤثر، والذي غالبًا ما يُغفل عنه، وهو بُعد رسّخه المؤلف بعناية منذ الصفحات الأولى. من خلال تحليل ما بعد الاستعمار، يبحث هذا البحث في حلقات سردية رئيسية ليبيّن كيف تُعبّر الرواية القصيرة عن سردية مقاومة لا من خلال المعارضة التقليدية، بل من خلال التضحية والنهضة. وعلى وجه التحديد، تُجادل الدراسة بأن المهمشين، ولا سيما النساء، يُصبحون الوسيلة التي تُعبّر من خلالها الأمة الصينية المُستعمرة عن "ردّها المضاد"، مؤكدةً على قدرتها على الفعل ومرونتها الثقافية. في نهاية المطاف، يُعيد هذا البحث تصنيف العمل كنص ما بعد استعماري هام، كاشفًا عن نقده المُتعدد الأوجه للسلطة والذاكرة والهوية